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The *malen'kii chelovek* in Almaty: Masculinity in Nariman Turebaev's Films

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The Kazakh director Nariman Turebaev first received global attention with his short film *Antiromantika* (2001), which screened at that year's Cannes Festival in the Cinéfondation section. The short depicts an encounter between a bashful young man and a self-confident woman whom he is paying for sex. The man, however, fails to perform sexually, and, after a brief period of heavy breathing, with the camera focused on the blank wall, the woman murmurs, "Never mind. It happens. Everything's all right" (*Antiromantika* 2001). The film shows Turebaev's early interest in the frustrations and failures of the little man (*malen'kii chelovek*), a concern that arguably becomes the central theme of his three feature-length films, *Little Men* (*Malen'kie liudi*, 2003), *Sunny Days* (*Solnechnye dni*, 2011), and *Adventure* (*Prikliuchenie*, 2014). This article places Turebaev's *malen'kii chelovek* into his global context, showing how he struggles with new masculinity norms imported into post-Soviet Kazakhstan alongside the emerging market economy, while also tracing his roots back to Russian literature of the 1830s and 1840s. I stress the need to see the *malen'kii chelovek* in terms of his masculinity: he is depicted as a weak, feminized or infantilized man in both classic Russian literature and Turebaev's films. However, I argue that Turebaev's films harness this figure of the weak man to challenge the dominant configurations of masculinity in both Kazakh and global cinema, even though this challenge ultimately depends on a familiar, arguably problematic juxtaposition of weak, sympathetic men and strong, dangerous women.

Turebaev's three feature-length films highlight the precariousness of everyday life for those young men who have benefited little from the new Kazakhstan's economic boom.[1] His work combines an understated urban realism with flashes of wry humor and fleeting moments of transcendence. His male protagonists face the drudgery of dead-end jobs or the despair of unemployment, as well as troubled personal relationships with girlfriends, friends and families. His cinema, then, responds to the sense of "crisis of masculinity" that men have experienced across the post-socialist world as the various successor states have developed their own national mythologies, developed a market economy and entered the global capitalist system.[2] In the Russian context, the sociologist Irina Tartakovskaia (2002) coined the term "unfulfilled masculinity"(*nesostoavshaiasia maskulinnost'*) to refer to this sense of malaise among post-Soviet men. Similarly, in her study of Chinese masculinity, Xueping Zhong (2000) identifies a "search for manly men" (*xunzhao nanzihan*) in the literature of the 1980s, as the country transformed into a market economy and the state ideology moved away from celebrating iconic male heroes in the vein of Pavel Korchagin (Zhong 2000: 45–46). Yet what is interesting about Turebaev is his unexpected turn towards the *malen'kii chelovek* in this period. Rather than invent strong male heroes who can conform to capitalist ideology—or lead resistance against it—Turebaev calls up the hapless, often ridiculous male heroes from Nikolai Gogol''s stories and the early Dostoevskii, and transports them to contemporary Almaty.

However, it would be wrong simply to treat Turebaev's films as fodder for sociological commentary. Rather, I aim to situate his work as part of a larger cinematic dialogue about masculinity both within Kazakhstan and beyond, noting how his films rework tropes from both genre and arthouse cinema. Turebaev not only depicts the effects of the global economy in his films; he himself has become part of the global marketplace of art-house cinema. *Little Men* and *Adventure* are co-productions between Kazakhstan and France, and his films have found success on the European festival circuit, where, perhaps, audiences are more sympathetic to his formal experimentation and the non-normative masculinities in his work.[3] Moreover, his work engages with and parodies global trends in masculinity in cinema. I suggest that we can read *Little Men* as an ironic riposte to the Hollywood buddy film or bromance, particularly its racialized version in which a white man and man of color team up, their male bonding symbolizing the overcoming of racial tensions. *Sunny Days* continues the parody of the bromance, but also reworks the iconic rebel masculinity of Viktor Tsoi as Moro in Rashid Nugmanov's *The Needle* (*Igla*, 1988). Finally, *Adventure* provides a case study in how masculinity travels across boundaries of time, space and medium, as Turebaev transposes Fedor Dostoevskii's story "White Nights"(Belye nochi, 1848) to twenty-first century Almaty.

While *Adventure* is the only film explicitly labelled as an adaptation, the influence of nineteenth-century Russian literature looms large even in his earlier work. In interviews, Turebaev speaks explicitly about the Russian classics as a source of inspiration: they are "the pinnacle of world literature" and "the foundation for all contemporary world art" (Doak 2016). The very title of *Little Men* gives a nod to the *malen'kii chelovek* topos, which, although found in literature since antiquity, gained particular prominence in Russian texts of the 1830s and 1840s such as Aleksandr Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman"(Mednyi vsadnik, 1833) and Nikolai Gogol''s "The Overcoat"(Shinel', 1842). Iurii Mann (2001) identifies the *malen'kii chelovek*'s key features in texts of this period: he

typically occupies a low position on the socioeconomic hierarchy; his modest position affects his psychology and his behavior; the arc of his character development sees him face insult, abuse and misfortune. The plots of Turebaev's films see his protagonists face similar humiliations and hardships; moreover, his films recall the literary texts in their tragicomic mood and their focus on alienation in the modern metropolis.

Turebaev eagerly accepts the designation of a filmmaker dedicated to representing the *malen'kii chelovek* on screen:

> I like making films about people living on the margins, those who are not readily accepted in society, living a gray, unremarkable life. […] These people generally have a very rich interior world. […] They create their own world, one simply crying out for cinematic representation. (*Nashe kino* 2015)

These remarks capture the sympathetic portrayal of the *malen'kie liudi* in his films. Though often portrayed as comic bunglers, these heroes nonetheless possess a certain beguiling innocence and attract audience sympathy. Yet what is missing from this statement is any consideration of how gender factors into his characterization. All three films contain a particular, repeated set of gender dynamics: the lowly, meek male protagonists feature in opposition to lively, loquacious women. In other words, while Turebaev speaks about *malen'kie liudi* in gender-neutral terms, his films belie his gender-specific take on the *malen'kii chelovek* as male. In my view, his films demonstrate how hegemonic masculinity oppresses men, a cinematic exemplar of how the gender system excludes men who cannot or will not conform to ideal capitalist masculinity. As globalization spreads, capitalism requires men to embody a new kind of hegemonic masculinity: one that is "aggressive, ruthless, competitive and adversarial" (Acker 2004: 10; see also Connell 1998). Turebaev's heroes have precisely the opposite qualities.

When I asked Turebaev about the source of this juxtaposition of strong woman with weak men, he replied "It's Freud, pure Freud, and nothing more." He prefers to speak in personal terms rather than address broader socio-cultural trends in gender (Doak 2016). When I further questioned whether his weak men reflected the "crisis of masculinity" sometimes observed in the post-Soviet space of the 1990s, he answered that he wasn't aware of that term, but he did reference "male infantilization," which, in his view, was not necessarily a bad thing (Doak 2016). "As men," Turebaev comments, "we constantly try to pull ourselves out of this mire of infantilization, and yet, at the same time, we expend a lot of energy in keeping our own infantilism alive." This discourse of infantilization is a familiar one in the late Soviet and post-Soviet period. As Eliot Borenstein (2008: 47) points out, "infantilization" has become a "watchword for the defenders of male pride" in post-Soviet Russia, associated with indecisiveness, irresponsibility and the failure to act. However, it is significant that Turebaev sees nothing inherently wrong with this infantilization and even reclaims it; it is problematic only if it becomes a self-serving performance. Of course, the weak man / strong woman juxtaposition in Russian culture stems back to nineteenth-century literature: Mann (2001) notes it is a recurring feature of *malen'kii chelovek* texts. Several feminist studies have highlighted how the depiction of women as strong or ideal in nineteenth century texts actually serves to confine them.[4] This pattern appears in texts such as Dostoevskii's *Poor Folk* (*Bednye liudi*, 1846), with Makar Devushkin's idolization of Varvara Petrovna, or indeed in Poprishchin's idealization of Sophie in Gogol''s *Diary of a Madman* (*Zapiski sumashedshego*, 1835).

Although the term *malen'kii chelovek* is ostensibly gender neutral, in practice literary critics often reserve it for men, rarely applying it to the female characters who should qualify.[5] It is hardly surprising, then, that the customary English translation for the *malen'kii chelovek* topos is "little *man*," not "little person."[6] Such usage does not simply testify to a historical failure among critics to employ gender-inclusive language. Rather, it reflects an implicit recognition that the corpus of *malen'kii chelovek* texts mostly concerns men and their anxieties, even though critics have rarely considered explicitly on how masculinity functions in these texts. [7] It should also come as no surprise that the English title for Turebaev's first film, is *Little Men*, not *Little People*. Such translations reveal a slippage of terminology whereby a supposedly universal term—in this case *chelovek/liudi*—in fact covertly refers primarily or exclusively to man/men. This is a familiar problem for gender theorists, who recognize that masculinity typically functions as an unmarked category (Reeser 2010: 8–9), much like other normative categories such as whiteness or heterosexuality. Such invisibility helps perpetuate the power structures associated with hegemonic masculinity, allowing it to evade examination and criticism. This article thus represents an attempt to make visible the gender dynamics hidden within the *malen'kii chelovek* topos as presented in Turebaev's films.

The Entrepreneur's New Clothes in *Little Men*

Since Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, many filmmakers have concentrated their energy on providing a national mythology for their country (Abikeyeva 2006 and 2013; Isaacs 2015; Norris 2012). This quest for national identity often entails articulating a new masculinity: such popular films such as *Nomad* (*Köşpendiler*, 2005) and *Mongol* (2008) have imagined a heroic, pseudo-historical masculinity based on the idealized figure of the warrior or hunter riding through the steppe, whereas Serik Aprymov's *The Hunter* (*Okhotnik*, 2004) offers a more critical, art-house take on that trend. Far from featuring heroes on horseback, Turebaev's protagonists are modern-day Akakii Akakieviches, struggling to eke out a living in the city. Such heroes are part of a different tradition in Kazakh cinema, particularly those films of 1990s that found as much confusion and despair as opportunity in the era of independence (Smailova 2008). such as Darezhan Omirbaev's *Killer* (1998). The critic Jane Knox-Voina (2009) considers the heroes of *Little Men* part of the generation of "asphalt children," a group of urban dwellers in post-Soviet Central Asia who suffer from a "confusion of identity" because they "no longer fee[l] connected to a traditional rural or Asian past."[8] However, while her analysis emphasizes the asphalt generation's alienation in terms of a national identity crisis, I suggest that this loss of national identity intersects with a broader anxiety about how masculinity operates in the new Kazakhstan, and who is excluded.

This intersection between national identity and masculinity is visible right from the beginning of the opening sequence of *Little Men*. The opening shot is a close-up of a patterned fabric that resembles a Central Asian handicraft, fooling the viewer into anticipating a film about Kazakhstan's national symbols. However, we soon realize this fabric actually forms part of the underpants of a young man dressing for work; he hastily pulls a pair of gray suit pants over his briefs (Fig. 1). The opening scene

shows this protagonist, Bek (Erzhan Bekmuratov), and his roommate, Maks (Oleg Kerimov), dressing in their business suits as they prepare for their day job as salesmen. Eugénie Zvonkine (2013: 182) calls Bek's patterned underpants an "openly ironic" tribute to the older generation of Kazakh filmmakers. However, the sequence also points to how post-independence Kazakhstan, far from facilitating the restoration of a heroic masculinity, instead shoehorns men into the suit-and-tie body, the uniform of economically aspirational men in global capitalism.

For Turebaev, the salesman is a performer; his film is, in part, an ironic study in how (not) to perform the role. The plot centers around the successes and failures that Bek and Maks face in their daily job. Working for the same company, they pound the streets each day as they advertise their various wares in unlikely combinations: disposable razors, cheese graters, torches, and a key fob that lights up when you whistle. Turebaev's humorous exposé of how these men try to adapt to the market economy recalls such 1990s films as Satybaldy Narymbetov's *Ompa* (1998), a comedy in which two unemployed pilots experience a series of ridiculous misadventures when they set up a private aviation firm called "Salaam Alaykum." Both *Ompa* and *Little Men* plot the economic and cultural transition to capitalism in terms of a series of trials for male friendship. In both cases, men rely on male/male bonds to help negotiate the transition, yet those bonds can also be fractured as the men compete with one another. Additionally, both films pair an ethnic Kazakh with an ethnic Russian in the leading male roles, implying that both ethnicities must negotiate this change together.

Turebaev's film draws a clear contrast between Maks and Bek in terms of the two men's ability to adapt. The cocky Maks can easily win over customers with his confident sales patter, whereas Bek proves awkward and rarely makes a sale. Maks's superior ability at his job is matched by his success with women, and he enjoys a promiscuous lifestyle that attracts Bek's envy. Even though Maks provides coaching for Bek in his sales technique and the art of seduction, Bek finds little success in either area. One scene even sees him watch in amazement as, one by one, three women emerge from Maks's bedroom, presumably after a heady night of passion. The film thus underscores how the system of masculinity in the new capitalist Kazakhstan equates economic success—selling goods and earning money—with sexual and romantic success.

The film provides a critical perspective on this equation of economic and romantic success by treating it comically. One key scene sees Maks provide advice to Bek on how to be a better salesman, drawing on clichés of virility. "What we're doing is real man's work," he tells Bek, "A real man is a conqueror. You have to be able to subjugate others". Such language of conquest appears laughably out-of-place in the context of selling key fobs. However, it may reflect Turebaev's take on a trend in capitalist post-Soviet countries to imagine male entrepreneurs as "pioneers" doing men's work at the "frontier" of capitalism, as noted by Rebecca Kay in her work on Russian masculinities in the 1990s (Kay 2006: 100). Moreover, the sequence suggests Turebaev's parody of the trope of one man coaching another in the art of masculinity and seduction, found in such Hollywood films as Martin Brest's *Scent of a Woman* (1992) or Judd Apatow's *The 40-Year Old Virgin* (2005). Turebaev's take on this tradition ridicules it, and he again uses costume to ensure that Maks's words appear ludicrous. While Maks speaks of conquering heroes, he is relaxing in a bathrobe and wearing a facemask that, as he explains with the clichés of advertising, "refreshes and revitalizes the skin" (Fig. 2). Maks's overdetermined masculinity is a comic combination of two incompatible models: the conquering hero and the modern metrosexual.

Yet Maks's stylization of himself as the ideal metrosexual man is also undermined. Bek looks at the label of the "facemask" and reveals that it is, in fact, shaving cream. Maks's reply, "Ah well, I probably mixed them up. What difference does it make?", in fact holds a deeper significance. Just as David Clarke (2005: 282) points out that Maks's outward embrace of the free market belies an inner realization that capitalism is a "meaningless construct," so I would suggest that Maks's reply here implies an awareness of the performative nature of masculinity in the new Kazakhstan. Ultimately, it does not matter whether one uses the right grooming products to fashion oneself as a metrosexual man; all that matters is creating the right illusion.

Bek and Maks: A Central Asian Bromance?

The close relationship between Bek and Maks situates *Little Men* in the tradition of the buddy film, as Crawford (2015) notes. To pinpoint how Turebaev engages with that tradition, it is useful to consider the distinction that Michael DeAngelis (2014) draws between the buddy film and its newer counterpart, the bromance. For DeAngelis, the term "buddy film" refers to movies from the 1970s in which male characters retain a "discursive silence about the larger purpose of 'meaning' of the intimacy that they experience together" (DeAngelis 2014: 10). By contrast, the "bromance" denotes films made in our contemporary era, with its greater public awareness of homosexuality, at least in the US context, and so the male protagonists are required to articulate the exact nature of their relationship, often including a specific disavowal of any homosexual interest (DeAngelis 2014: 12–13). The men in a bromance must "manage" their homosocial relationship through dialogue and negotiation, although DeAngelis notes that such attempts to police the boundaries of intimacy never entirely succeed (DeAngelis 2014: 15). The bromance thus provides a particularly rich source for critical explorations of the tensions between homosocial and homosexual desire.

It is useful to compare how Narymbetov's *Ompa* and Turebaev's *Little Men* engage with this genre. *Ompa* resembles a buddy film: despite the bickering between Daur and Talalai, the two male leads, they maintain a strong bond and even verbalize their friendship at moments of heightened tension in the film. There is no overt anxiety about homosexuality in the film. However, *Little Men* explores the porousness of the homosocial/homosexual boundary. One early scene sees Bek listening intently to the sounds of intercourse between Maks and a woman. The boundaries of identification and desire are blurred, as the audience wonders whether Bek identifies with Maks or wishes to be with him. A later scene addresses homosexuality more directly, when the two men wake up and find themselves naked in bed together, with no memory of how they got there. Yet whereas DeAngelis

emphasizes how men in the contemporary bromance can manage their intimacy through dialogue, explaining how their relationship has no sexual element, Bek and Maks rather resemble the heroes from the older buddy film insofar as they lack the discursive resources to express their feelings. After the encounter, the two men—especially Bek—experience what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms "homosexual panic" (Sedgwick 1985: 89; see also Sedgwick 1990: 19–22; 182–212). They remain awkward, anxious and often silent in each other's company. Maks finally helps rescue the situation when he tells Bek that Lenka, a woman who visited their apartment that night, had put them together in bed as a joke, and the men were too drunk to notice. However, they never recover the easy intimacy that characterized their earlier friendship, and when both men lose their job at the end of the film, they go separate ways.

Issues of race and ethnicity are never referred to directly in *Little Men*. However, the relationship between Bek, who reads as Kazakh, and Maks, who reads as Slavic, takes on particular acuity if the film is interpreted through the prism of the burgeoning critical literature on race in the buddy film and the bromance. Critics have observed how these genres, at least in the American context, frequently pair two men of different ethnicities and explore interracial relations as well as male bonding (Donalson 2006; Reeser 2010: 200–215). One line of inquiry explores how a successful interracial friendship can function as a metonym for racial harmony or even signal the possibility of post-racial utopian world (Donalson 2006: 71–90). It follows, then, that representations of *failed* interracial bonding can be read as an "a pessimistic but eye-opening portrait of a culture's inability to bond internally" (Reeser 2010: 204). Should we then read the Bek/Maks relationship as a meditation on the relationship between ethnic Kazakhs and Russians in contemporary Kazakhstan, perhaps a riposte to the official government discourse of multi-ethnic harmony?[9]

Such a reading is tempting, but proves too simplistic. While Bek's name and his patterned underpants do underline his Kazakh heritage, he is a Russian speaker in Almaty, a city influenced by Soviet and global culture as much as Kazakh. Similarly, Maks does not necessarily read as a representative of all ethnic Russians. His style of masculinity owes more to global influences— the smooth-talking salesman, the metrosexual—than Soviet or Russian norms. The audience also learns that he has a German grandmother and hopes to emigrate to Germany. *Little Men*, then, perhaps uses interracial bonding not so much to comment on Russian/Kazakh relations, but to critique Kazakhstan's rush towards capitalism and globalization. Bek, initially infatuated by Maks's western brand of masculinity, soon realizes its limitations. He is shocked to learn that his friend's promiscuity has led to a woman getting pregnant and her plan to have an abortion. Moreover, after the two men lose their jobs, Bek loses faith in his friend's resourcefulness when Maks's emigration plans fails.[10] "I thought you'd think of something really good," comments the disappointed Bek. Maks, who had seemed a cosmopolitan, metrosexual entrepreneur, now faces the prospect of returning to his mother's home in the provincial town of Ural'sk. As Maks gets ready to depart, he does tell Bek of an eventual plan to move to Australia, that long-time destination of would-be masculine pioneers, but Maks's schemes have now failed too often for the audience—or even Bek—to take them seriously.

The film concludes with Bek standing alone, taking out a piece of leftover merchandise, one of the key fobs that light up in response to a whistle. While Bek's inability to whistle had previously been a source of comedy, he now manages to do so, and breaks into a smile as he sees the red light flicker (Fig. 3). The final shot is a blurry close-up of the colorful key fob, which has a similar pattern to Bek's underpants, thus echoing the first shot of the film and evoking the theme of Kazakh identity once again. This small moment of hope suggests that the failure of the bromance should be read positively, as Bek—symbolic of Kazakhstan—finally overcoming his infatuation with Maks—representing Western culture and its economic system—and discovering his own independence. Of course, Kazakh identity is inevitably compromised in the contemporary globalized world, represented as it is by cheap mass-produced consumer items such as the underpants and key fob. Nevertheless, the film arguably hints at the need of the rediscovery of a Kazakh identity that is not based on a romanticized view of history, the steppe, or conquering heroes, but which is rooted in the everyday, with ordinary *malen'kie liudi* in cities recognizing how global systems of capitalism and masculinity have entrapped them.

The Sexual Economy of *Sunny Days*

While *Little Men* ends with a glimmer of hope for Bek, *Sunny Days* presents a much bleaker picture of the *malen'kii chelovek* and his fate. The film's title is ironic: the action takes place in deep winter, and snowy scenes and cold blue lighting establish a mood of alienation. The plot revolves around a central protagonist's spiral of loss and misery: he loses his girlfriend at the start of the movie, falls out with his best friend, takes on an ill-fated job as a chauffeur for a visiting Russian Mafioso, faces the prospect of eviction from his apartment, and the final scene sees him commit suicide. This hero does not even have a name; the credits simply identify him as "He" ("On," played by Erlan Utepbergenov). In many respects, the protagonist resembles Bek: he is another emasculated, tongue-tied hero of the asphalt generation. However, *Sunny Days* adds a new focus on corruption and criminality, connecting the film to Omirbaev's *Killer*, a gloomy portrayal of 1990s Almaty in which the hero must take on a contract killing to clear his spiraling debt. Like *Killer*, *Sunny Days* treats the precariousness of the *malen'kii chelovek* under capitalism, but Turebaev also highlights a sexual economy that works alongside and inside the market economy and its shadowy criminal counterpart.

The first part of the film depicts another bromance, this time between the protagonist and his laid-back, heavy-drinking friend Kana (Iurii Radin). However, whereas *Little Men* depicts the threat of homosexuality that drives the two men apart, *Sunny Days* exploits the trope of the dangerous woman undermining the homosocial idyll. Kana's girlfriend lures the apparently reluctant protagonist into having sex with her, ending their friendship. Indeed, while *Sunny Days* provides a sympathetic portrait of the *malen'kii chelovek* and his woes, the film's gender ideology arguably pivots on the depiction of voracious women who have imperiled the hero's masculinity. One subplot features the protagonist turning for help to a glamorous middle-aged woman (Gul'zhan Kalybaeva), introduced as a friend of his mother. He asks if she can help him secure employment, and she finds a lucrative one-day job as a chauffeur for a visiting Russian mafia boss (Dmitrii Skirta). However, she demands sexual favors from him in return. The film depicts her as a lascivious vamp by emphasizing her exaggerated gestures, suggestive sighs, and gauche pick-up lines:

"What a big boy you are already," she tells him playfully, with an infantilizing touch on the nose. As is often the case in Turebaev's films, these scenes tackle the issue of sexual exploitation half in earnest, half in jest. On the one hand, Turebaev suggests that the sexual economy of contemporary Kazakhstan creates uneven power relationships that lead to economic, as well as sexual, exploitation. On the other hand, the film treats the protagonist's seduction as an opportunity for comedy, and it is telling that it does not address the reverse situation, where women are exploited by men.

Abikeyeva (2013: 171–174) has argued that Kazakh cinema since 1998 has begun to reimagine the possibility of the harmonious family as a synecdoche for national identity. Isaacs (2015: 408) has also noted how mother figures are a crucial part of building a national identity in films such as Ermek Tursunov's *The Bride* (*Kelin*, 2009). However, *Sunny Days* shows the other side of the coin, harnessing a sense of fear about the corruption of motherhood. The lecherous woman who seduces the protagonist is a "bad" surrogate mother, and his real mother has disappeared: she has emigrated with her new lover and no longer answers his telephone calls. Both are Kazakh versions of the "bad mother" or "mother-destroyer" that Jenny Kaminer identifies as a symbol of social turmoil in the literature and film of 1990s Russia (Kaminer 2015: 100–134). Kaminer (2015: 13–15) describes the ideal mother as a mythologized figure with unlimited resources of energy and love to spend on her beloved son. However, Turebaev's film suggests that the sexual economy of capitalist Kazakhstan has corrupted even the mother, turning her into a lascivious woman who now makes demands of her own.

If a certain conservatism characterizes the film's representation of women, the film's depiction of men often parodies conventional masculinities. Key among these is the representation of the mafia boss, which a pastiche of the hard masculinities associated with the gangster film. First seen in the requisite suit and sunglasses, he initially cuts a tough figure in the mold of Don Corleone from *The Godfather* (1972). However, beneath the steely surface, he turns out to be a stereotypical Russian *muzhik*, keen to spend the evening in a local dive bar (*pivnukha*), drinking beer with the hero, munching dried fish, and chatting up women. "This is my homeland [*rodina*]," comments the boss wistfully as he enters the seedy establishment, perhaps Turebaev's comment on the legacy of a certain kind of Russian masculinity in Kazakhstan. However, the boss proves not so powerful or virile as he thinks. After picking up two girls at the bar, the boss and the protagonist wake up in their hired SUV the following morning to discover that the girls spiked their drinks and stole their money. Even the mafia boss, then, turns out to be the victim of dangerous women in the sexual economy of the new Kazakhstan.

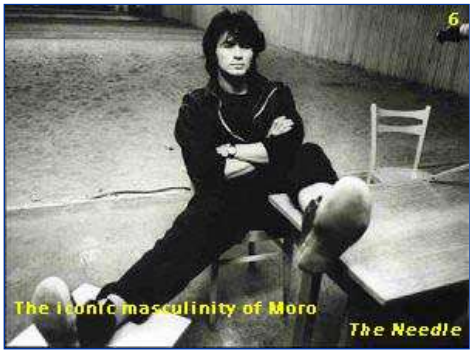
Alternative Masculinities in *Sunny Days*

One of the few characters who offers help to the protagonist seemingly without expecting anything in return is his neighbor Aziz (Tolepbergen Baisakalov). A soft-spoken man with long hair, Aziz has an ornately decorated home and wears androgynous clothing, marking him as potentially queer, though the film does not make his sexuality explicit. However, he does provide an alternative model of masculinity in the film, and he arguably even takes over the maternal role that no woman fulfills. Nevertheless, the hero is reluctant to accept Aziz's hospitality and remains uneasy in his presence, perhaps because he is unfamiliar with this brand of masculinity or suspects a hidden transactional element in the friendship. In a long scene when he has tea in Aziz's apartment, the camera emphasizes the hero's discomfort through shot composition: the two men are decentered and seem overwhelmed by the elaborate furnishing. This unsettling effect is accentuated by the palpable silence and Aziz's lingering gaze at the protagonist as the younger man eats (Fig. 4). Although the softer masculinity offered by Aziz could represent a way out for the hero, he proves unwilling or unable to respond to the older man's kindness. The end of the film cuts from the protagonist's attempt at suicide in front of a truck to Aziz playing the "Pas de quatre" theme from Piotr Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, the choice of composer being another nod to Aziz's queerness. This melancholy conclusion underscores the separation of the two men and the closure of this possible alternative path.

While Aziz offers a gentle, potentially queer masculinity, *Sunny Days* also alludes to a more rebellious icon of alternative masculinity, the rock star turned actor, Viktor Tsoi. The film's very title evokes Tsoi: "Sunny Days" is the name of a 1982 rock anthem written by Tsoi and performed by Kino. More significantly, however, the film frequently cites and engages with intertext with *The Needle,* the defining film directed by Nugmanov that starred Tsoi in the leading role as Moro. A rebellious, loner hero, Moro soon became a cult icon not just of Kazakh cinema, but a symbol of the restless perestroika era (Beumers 2007). As Vitaly Chernetsky points out, Moro is himself a postmodern pastiche of the lonely outsider hero from French, American and even Hong Kong cinema (Chernetsky 2013: 150–151). An unemployed drifter in a leather jacket, Moro both channels and parodies the iconic cool masculinity associated with such stars as Marlon Brando or James Dean, unsettling Soviet masculinity just as they had redefined post-war American masculinity in the 1950s.

Turebaev's protagonist aspires to link himself with Tsoi, strumming the song "Sunny Days" on his guitar and singing along, but his vocal skills do not match Tsoi's and his performance comes off as melancholy. His circumstances also resemble Moro's to some extent: both are unemployed drifters at odds with the society around them and its values. However, whereas Nugmanov's film affords a degree of romanticism to Moro—albeit mediated by postmodern irony—Turebaev's shows the harsh realities of this outsider status. Moreover, whereas the camera in *The Needle* admires Tsoi's body, in *Sunny Days* it rather emasculates the hero. Contrast the negative body language of Turebaev's downcast protagonist (Fig. 5) with the confident pose of Moro in his trademark leather jacket, arms folded and legs spread apart (Fig. 6). Moro drives the plot of *The Needle*, but the protagonist lacks any agency in *Sunny Days*; others exploit him—sexually, economically—from beginning to end. The conclusion sees him commit suicide, throwing himself in front a truck on a winter's evening. Here Turebaev cites the famous conclusion of *The Needle* in which

Moro is stabbed on a snowy path. Yet whereas Moro rises from the dead to walk through the snow, Turebaev's hero is afforded no such opportunity. *Sunny Days* might ultimately be read as a commentary of post-independence disillusionment. Perestroika-era dreams of a different way of life, embodied in the aesthetics of *The Needle* generally and in Moro's masculinity specifically, have not come to fruition in the new Kazakhstan.



Adapting Dostoevskii's Dreamer in *Adventure*

Turebaev's most recent film, *Adventure*, looks back to a source of alternative masculinity much older than Moro/Tsoi, the Dreamer from Dostoevskii's *White Nights*. The film transposes the story to contemporary Almaty, turning the hero—known in the story only as "the Dreamer"—into Marat (Azamat Nigmanov), a malen'kii chelovek who works nights as a security guard in an office block. Of Turebaev's three feature films, *Adventure* is the most cinematographically innovative, experimenting with light, symbol and especially the use of silence to convey the hero's alienation. Both the story and the adaptation follow the same plot, charting how the hero falls in love with a woman—Nasten'ka in the text, Mar'iam (Ainur Niiazova) in the film—who is waiting for her suitor to return after a period of absence. In both book and film, the conclusion sees the suitor unexpectedly turning up at the end and the woman choosing to return to him, just as she was beginning to develop reciprocal feelings for the hero.

Both Dostoevskii's Dreamer and Turebaev's Marat are depicted as deficient in masculinity. The Dreamer explicitly describes himself as "not a man," but "a creature of neuter gender" [ne chelovek… a kakoe-to sushchestvo srednego roda] (Dostoevskii 1972, 2: 112). He provides a life story to Nasten'ka that emphasizes his social alienation, his inability to maintain friendships with other men and his difficulty in joining their conversations about the "fair sex" (Ibid.). Even the plot of the story serves to emasculate him: Nasten'ka abandons him once the suitor turns up and usurps his role. Turebaev's Marat appears socially isolated in the same way as the Dreamer; several scenes show him alone on the bus or at the grocery store, underlining how contemporary Almaty can be as alienating as Dostoevskii's St. Petersburg. The film picks up on the hints about masturbation in "White Nights" (see Apollonio 2009: 39), showing a solitary Marat reading pornographic magazines during his night shift. Moreover, *Adventure* implies that Marat is actively trying to mold his body and his image to conform to the requirements of contemporary masculinity: for example, one scene shows him with his shirt unbuttoned pounding a punching bag; he also aspires to get ahead professionally and become a manager. However, these attempts to embody masculinity remain futile: Marat receives the humiliation and misfortunes typical of a *malen'kii chelovek* in Russian literature.

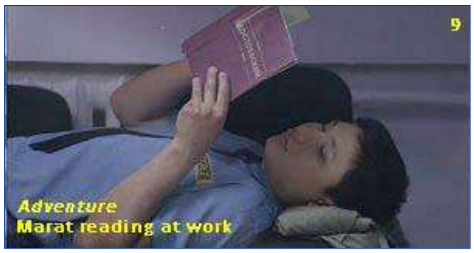
Turebaev's Mar'iam is stronger, feistier and more sexually accomplished than Dostoevskii's Nasten'ka, consistent with a trend in recent Kazakh adaptations of literary texts to emphasize the role of women (Smailova 2008). Mar'iam possesses a certain vulnerability behind her brassy exterior that make her more complex than a typical *femme fatale*; in my interview with Turebaev, he was keen to emphasize that he did not put either Mar'iam or Nasten'ka on a pedestal (Doak 2016). Nevertheless, the Marat/Mar'iam relationship is characterized by a particular set of power relations, with Mar'iam humiliating Marat by placing him in degrading situations in front of other men, testing the limits of his pride. For example, in one scene set in a nightclub together, she asks him to set her up with another man. Figure 8 shows her smirking in the foreground as Marat approaches the stranger on her behalf. The three of them walk home together, but Marat is left alone as Mar'iam and her new lover head off into the bushes, presumably to have sex. The patient Marat willingly waits for them to emerge, but Mar'iam suddenly calls for help, shouting, "He wanted to rape me!" "Isn't that what you wanted?" replies the bemused Marat. "I didn't, I didn't!" responds Nasten'ka, who apparently warms to Marat precisely because he does not represent the same conventional masculinity and sexual threat found in other men.

Inna Smailova's observation about the more sophisticated treatment of women in adaptations, then, also applies to masculinity. This positive spin on Marat's lack of conventional masculinity reappears later in the film. Determined to better himself, Marat secures a job interview for a position as manager of a cleaning company. Unfortunately, the interview turns into another humiliation, as the interviewer laughs in his face, telling him he lacks the necessary experience and skills. Although the scene has no direct precedent in "White Nights", it does draw on other passages in classic *malen'kii chelovek* texts, such as Akakii Akakievich's meeting with the Very Important Personage in "The Overcoat." It also continues the critical portrait of capitalist masculinity seen earlier with *Little Men*. However, what is intriguing about the interview in *Adventure* is that the interviewer does not tell Marat that he is not a real man because he cannot make money, as Maks did to Bek. Paradoxically, he instead suggests that Marat's lowly position in the hierarchy is proof that he is a real man: "A security guard is a worthy job, worthy of a man, worthy of a real man! [dostoino nastoiashchego muzhchiny]. You, Marat, are a good person [chelovek]. Better than me." Even if his words are ironic in part, they imply that even an employer in the new capitalist Kazakhstan measures a man's worth not only by his utility in the workforce, as hegemonic masculinity suggests he ought.

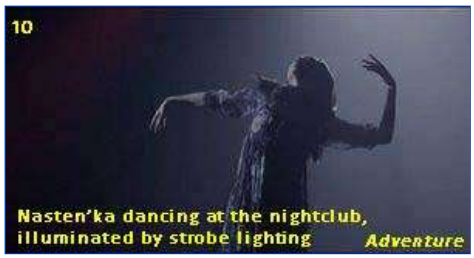
While these scenes establish the audience's sympathy for Marat, it is much less clear whether Dostoevskii's Dreamer should be read as a sympathetic character. One line of criticism sees the Dreamer as a force for good: Konstantin Mochulsky calls him a "sensitive hero" in a story that "strikes a chord of serene and joyful melody" (1967, 96). However, an increasing critical consensus sees the Dreamer in a more negative light, underscoring the unreliability of his first-person narrative and his tendency to aggrandize his own failings. This argument has been made most forcefully by Carol Apollonio, who even suggests that the

Dreamer can be read as a "predator" (2009: 38). Building on Apollonio's idea that writing provides a form of self-justification for the Dreamer, I would further suggest the Dreamer's first-person narrative does not simply express his lack of masculinity, but intentionally creates a gender performance out of his own emasculation.[11] This performative dimension of the Dreamer's narrative is evident from his highly affected literary style. Before beginning his woeful life story, he notes, "I sat down next to her, struck a learned, serious pose and began to tell my story as if I were reading from a book" (Dostoevskii 1972: 112). Following this line of inquiry, even the Dreamer's claim that he is a "creature of neuter gender" should not be read not as a statement of fact, but as part of his performance of failed masculinity, perhaps even designed to give him a certain cachet with Nasten'ka by proving that he is not a threat to her.

However, this performative dimension appears absent in *Adventure*.[12] Turebaev's own statements testify to his intention to create Marat as a positive character. Speaking about *Adventure* in particular, he commented, "I'm often told that I make films about 'little' people. But I would call them 'angels on the roadside'. They are kind, simple folk who fill our lives with light" (Turebaev, quoted in Kozlov, n.d.). While this description fits Marat, it hardly matches the portrait of Dostoevskii's Dreamer above, which sees him not as a "simple" *malen'kii chelovek*, but a skilled narrator whose weaknesses are part of a performance. Much of Turebaev's work in *Adventure*, then, involves transforming the compromised Dreamer character back into the more innocent, sincere Marat.



The transposition of the story from book to film helps facilitate this process, as cinema does not typically use the first-person narrative, the main tool that Dostoevskii uses to indicate the Dreamer's lack of sincerity. The role of silence in the film provides an important example of how Turebaev edits out the performative element of the Dreamer. In *White Nights*, the Dreamer concludes his story with a self-dramatizing silence. "With an air of pathos I fell silent, having completed my pathos-filled exclamations," (Dostoevskii 1972, 2: 117), he writes, the grandiose language and repetition of "pathos" signaling that this is a staged silence. By contrast, Turebaev's film provides no indication that Marat's frequent silences should be read as staged performances. Mar'iam even comments positively on these silences towards the end of the film, telling him "Your silence is more valuable than any words." The use of protracted silent scenes not only establishes Marat's loneliness, but also implies his sincerity, a fact that becomes obvious when the minimalist role of Marat is set alongside the text of Dostoevskii's garrulous narrator, who speaks about his own misfortunes all too eloquently.



In fact, silence is only one of the aesthetic strategies used to underline Marat's sincerity. A restrained use of color, lighting and action characterize all Turebaev's films, particularly *Adventure*. The use of stark, electric lighting to illuminate him suggests Marat's unaffected nature, as do his simple outfits—the security guard's uniform or casual T-shirts, and muted palettes of whites and blues (Fig. 9). These elements underscore his naivety, his loneliness and the lack of excitement in his everyday life, and they formally underscore the difference with Nasten'ka, often depicted in vibrant colors or half in darkness (Fig. 10). The formal features of his film —the slow pacing, the frequent use of close-ups, and the silence—work in opposition to the conventional fast-paced cinematography and action that Stella Bruzzi identifies as characteristic of masculinity in mainstream Hollywood cinema (Bruzzi 2013). Ultimately, this adaptation borrows from the malen'kii chelovek tradition not only to challenge the familiar plots of narrative film, but uses a different style of cinematography to imagine an alternative kind of masculinity.

Conclusions

Why did Dostoevskii wish to critique the Dreamer as a performer of failed masculinity, and why did Turebaev restore his sincerity? Answering this question helps us not only understand the intertextual relationship between "White Nights"and *Adventure*, but also how the masculinity of the *malen'kii chelovek* travels from nineteenth-century Russia to twenty-first century Kazakhstan. To understand the climate in which Dostoevskii was writing, it is helpful to consider the 1847 newspaper article in his *Petersburg Chronicle* (*Peterburgskaia letopis'*), in which he first outlined his critique of the Dreamer. Here, Dostoevskii considers the Dreamer as a problematic "Russian type" who lacks resolve and the ability to *act*, rather than simply *feel*. His alleged lack of masculinity lies at the heart of the problem: this "strange creature of neuter gender" may crave activity and reality, but he is too "weak", "effeminate," (zhenstvennyi) and "tender" (nezhnyi) to try to transform his dreams into actions (Dostoevskii 1978, 18: 38). Moreover, Dostoevskii's analysis connects gender and national identity. His feminized dreamer as a "Russian type," is juxtaposed against the practically minded German who takes everything to its logical extreme without regard for the possible consequences. This anxiety about Russian men's lack of masculinity recurs in the nineteenth-century novel, as in Turgenev's treatment of the superfluous man, but perhaps most obviously in the comparison between Stolz and Oblomov of Goncharov's *Oblomov* (1859). Although Dostoevskii's article does indicate some limited sympathy for the "Russian type", he expresses a distinct preference for action—gendered masculine—over imagination and emotion—gendered feminine.

Just as Dostoevskii was writing at a time when Russia was forging its national identity in opposition to the West, so Turebaev is making films at a decisive moment for the shaping of Kazakh national identity. Like Dostoevskii's suspicion of German rationality in the 1840s, so Turebaev's films parody the utilitarian model of masculinity favored under capitalism. Yet whereas Dostoevskii urges Russian men to act, rather than think and feel, Turebaev's films imply the opposite: the weak, sensitive masculinity of Bek, the hero of *Sunny Days* and Marat is presented much more favorably than the ideal masculinity of masculinity (represented by Maks) or the hard masculinity of the mafia boss parodied in *Sunny Days*. This positive portrayal of the *malen'kii chelovek* does draw on discourses of male infantilism associated with the 1980s and 1990s, but his films do not simply present this male weakness as a problem to be overcome, but rather imagine how it might provide solutions, albeit provisional, to the problem of alienation in an uncertain, globalized world. Bek's moment of personal transformation in *Little Men*, the possibility of a connection the hero and Aziz in *Sunny Days*, and Marat's kindness in *Adventure* all provide moments of hope, even transcendence. Ultimately, Turebaev

brings together the aesthetic experimentation of Kazakh New Wave Cinema and his appropriation of the *malen'kii chelovek* topos to reimagine masculinity. Men's heroism, these films suggest, need not involve physical or even verbal feats, but rather requires an interior shift, a transformation of the imagination and a different way of telling stories and making films.

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I would like to thank Birgit Beumers, Katherine Bowers, Vitaly Chernetsky, Tatiana Filimonova, Rico Isaacs and Jenny Kaminer for their suggestions on an earlier draft of this manuscript. I am particularly grateful to Nariman Turebaev for giving such generous, expansive answers in the interview that appears alongside this piece.

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Notes

1] For an economic history of Kazakhstan since 1991, see Olcott (2010: 128–171). Olcott emphasizes how privatization and the oil boom in contemporary Kazakhstan have led to the uneven distribution of wealth, with a "narrow and extremely wealthy elite" (130) taking the lion's share of capital and resources. For a discussion of how such inequalities are reflected in contemporary Kazakh film, see Isaacs (2015: 409–411).

2] Most of the work on post-Soviet masculinity has been done on the Russian context. See, inter alia, Ashwin 2000 and 2006, Kay 2006, esp. Chapters 3 and 4 on adjusting to the economy, Kon 2009: 133–149. More work still needs to be done on the specific configurations of masculinity that emerged in the other former Soviet republics.

3] *Little Men* was a co-production with France; the producer was Abderrahmane Sissako. The producer for *Sunny Days* was Limara Zheksembaeva, wife of Darezhan Omirbaev; they had pitched the project for funding at Open Doors Locarno in 2010. *Adventure* was produced by Arizona Films France and Kazakhfilm; the producer was Anna Katcko.

4] See Heldt 1986, Andrew 1988 and Lapidus 2008. Gheith (1996) examines how Evgeniia Tur's writing engages with the strong woman / superfluous man dynamic from a female perspective.

5] For instance, all of the examples cited by Mann (2001) are men; the connection of the *malen'kii chelovek* to questions of honor, ambition and the world of work—typically as a clerk— all mark him as male. The unfortunate female characters of this period, such as the eponymous heroines of Karamzin's *Poor Liza* (*Bednaia Liza*, 1792) and Dostoevskii's *Netochka Nezvanova* (1849) are not usually considered as *malen'kie liudi*.

6] The term "little man" is the usual form in histories of nineteenth-century Russian literature, such as Peace (1992: 189) or Wachtel and Vinitsky (2009: 109)

7] So far, there has less critical work on weak men than strong women, but there is now growing interest in masculinity in nineteenth century texts. Ellen Rutten (2010: 40) notes how men of nineteenth-century Russian literature are often weak or feminized, though her work concentrates on the second half of the century. Valentino (2014) explores how the rise of capitalism affected notions of masculine virtue in nineteenth century literature.

8] Knox-Voina notes that the term "asphalt children" was coined by director Guka Omarova to describe the protagonist of her film *Schizo* (*Shiza*, 2004). Omarova's film fits the analysis of masculinity employed here; the naïve young protagonist offers an alternative model of masculinity to that found among the men organizing and participating in the illegal fights. Knox-Voina does not focus on masculinity, but she does note how the newest generation of Kazakh filmmakers tend to feature troubled male protagonists, pointing to the "noticeable absence of heroines" in contemporary Kazakh shorts.

9] The population of contemporary Kazakhstan remains divided between the titular nationality, the Kazakhs, and a sizable minority of Russians, mostly ethnic Slavs. The 1999 census, the last taken before *Little Men* was made in 2003, shows a population made up of 53.4 per cent Kazakhs and 29.9 per cent Russians (cited in Dave 2007: 114). For background on the relations between Russian and Kazakh communities, see Olcott (2010, 51-86) and Dave (2007). On the official discourse of multi-ethnic harmony, see Ualiyeva and Edgar (2014). Isaacs (2015: 406–407) notes how the tension between Kazakhstan's official promotion of the titular culture and its discourse of ethnic harmony has sometimes appeared in film.

10] See Clarke (2005: 282–285) for a fuller discussion of emigration in *Little Men*.

11] Elsewhere, I have argued that such a performance of failure also characterizes Stepan Trofimovich in Dostoevskii's *Demons* (*Besy*, 1871–2) (Doak 2015b).

12] Interestingly, in my interview with Turebaev, he touches on the idea that men might turn their own failure into a self-serving performance. Speaking about male infantilism, he comments, "I have a feeling that some men have become infantile on purpose, and indeed, for show" (Doak 2016). However, I can see little evidence from the films that would encourage the audience to read the failures of Bek, the protagonist of *Sunny Days* or Marat as performances.

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